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Friday August 28, 3:47 pm Eastern Time

Company Press Release

Water Agencies Disappointed Over Missed Opportunity in Water Bond

SACRAMENTO, Calif.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Aug. 28, 1998--The Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) expressed disappointment that a \$1.7 billion water management bond failed to pass the state Senate last night, missing the Secretary of State's August 27 deadline for inclusion on the November 1998 ballot.

"I'm very disappointed that what I think was a very good bond package failed to meet last night's deadline," said ACWA Executive Director Steve Hall. "The state's political leaders simply couldn't agree on what they thought a balanced package should look like."

The bond would have provided funding for Stage 1 of the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, a joint state-federal effort to restore the health of the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. It also included funding for groundwater storage, water recycling facilities, water conservation facilities and flood control projects.

The main sticking point, however, was the inclusion of funding for feasibility studies and advance planning for off-stream surface storage.

Senate Democrats, led by Senate President pro term John Burton, D-San Francisco, refused to pass a bond bill that included money for these studies, while Republican leaders refused to pass the bill without such funding.

"This bond's failure means the next Governor and the people of California face an even steeper uphill battle to address this state's growing water needs," Hall said.

The bond also set aside \$235 million for water conservation projects required to move ahead a water transfer deal between the San Diego County Water Authority and the Imperial Irrigation District. That money has now been included in a separate bill moving through the Legislature that calls for an appropriation out of the state's general fund.

ACWA is a statewide, nonprofit association representing more than 440 public water agencies who collectively manage and deliver 90 percent of the state's urban and agricultural water.

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State President Pro Tem John Burton, D-San Francisco, called Wilson's demand for \$150 million in reservoir planning "money no prudent person would spend."

Sean Walsh, a gubernatorial spokesman, blamed the bond failure on legislators under the sway of "elitist environmental groups from San Francisco."

In a press release, Wilson blamed "no-growth advocates" for convincing Burton to reject reservoir money.

The governor has said it makes sense to begin the long, expensive process of reservoir feasibility studies so that approval can be secured more quickly once CalFed decides whether and where to build them.

The Sites reservoir near Colusa and an enlarged Los Vaqueros Reservoir south of Brentwood are among 12 locations under review by CalFed.

This week's frantic negotiations promise to be just a dress rehearsal for CalFed as its member agencies must decide by December how and when they will pursue new water storage projects.

"The burden we have now," said CalFed Executive Director Lester Snow, "is doing a better job of showing how storage -- surface water and groundwater -- can be used in a balanced package with conservation, reclamation and transfers."

Without a bond, Snow said, CalFed must search for ways to fund its water conservation and quality programs and to strengthen Delta levees. CalFed will consider taxing water users, appealing to Congress or trying another bond measure, he said.

Political leaders who favor stronger flood defenses were disappointed at the demise of the bonds.

"The flood victims are still victims," said Rich Golb, executive director of the Northern California Water Association, which represents agricultural interests. "We had the worst flood in the state's history a year ago and these bonds were intended to keep that from happening again."

"The failure of the bonds guarantees that we'll have another flood, more lives will be lost and we'll have more property damage."

To Jeffrey Mount, chair of the geology department at UC-Davis and an expert on flood management, it's more proof of how quickly people forget a river's reach.

"Had we had a spectacular flood this winter," he said, "I suspect the outcome (on the bond) would be different."

McClatchy Wire Services and the Associated Press contributed to this story.

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